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Post Office Box 8650, Ottawa, Ont. K1G 0G8  
(613) 731-9331

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**PUBLISHER'S PAGE**

## Government without frills: we're still free to choose

Like fire, government is a good servant but a poor master.

In their book "Free to Choose" (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1980), economists Milton and Rose Friedman pick up this theme several times; they urge a return to basic government, saying that this would allow for provision of four fundamentals: defending the nation from foreign enemies, protecting each of us from coercion by our fellow citizens, adjudicating our disputes and enabling us to agree upon the roles we should follow.

This Jeffersonian concept may well be impracticable in our entrenched mixed economy, but surely at least the trend towards public enterprise, which is usually neither truly public nor truly enterprising, can be slowed.

The Friedmans noted that in the United States more than 40% of individual income is disposed of "on our behalf" by federal, state and local governments. They point to the US Department of what used to be called Health, Education, and Welfare's \$160 billion 1978 budget (up astronomically from \$2 billion in 1953) and to the fact that the American government's share of total expenditures on medical care has gone from 25% in 1960 to 42% in 1977. The Friedmans conclude that paternalistic government programs "weaken the family, reduce the initiative to work, save and innovate, reduce the accumulation of capital and limit our freedom". We live in a society, they contend, that has moved beyond a quest for equality of opportunity to one of equality of results. As the

Dodo said in "Alice in Wonderland": "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes."

Nowhere is this more true than in Canada's health care system. At the same time as governments curtail funding, they want to retain — or even expand — services. Moreover, health-related decisions that used to be the preserve of the health care professional are now being made by committees of "expert" health care planners.

And yet in a sense we're still free to choose. Free to choose whether we want governments to serve us or master us. Such freedom will come only by demanding less government. And fewer prizes that turn out to have been bought with our own money.

### Notes for practising physicians

Practical, usable information. Facts that can be applied for your patients' benefit tomorrow. That's what our readers tell us they'd like to see more emphasis on in *CMAJ*.

Starting with this issue we embark upon a new — though inevitably sporadic, since there's no continuous flow of such immediately applicable data — series titled Notes for Practising Physicians. The initial article (starting on page 383) explains how Canadian doctors can obtain for their patients in exceptional circumstances essential drugs that have not yet been cleared for marketing in this country but may already be widely used elsewhere.

DAVID WOODS  
Director of Publications  
Canadian Medical Association